

Student and Parent Perceptions of Government-Funded Private Special Education Schools

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Abstract

We investigated the perceptions of students with disabilities (SWD) and their parents about the education offered in private special education institutions in Turkey, called “Special Education and Rehabilitation Centers” (SERCs). Data were collected from a survey administered to 453 SWD and 479 parents and interviews that were conducted with 38 parents. Survey findings indicated both satisfaction and, largely, dissatisfaction with the quality of special education offered in SERCs. Findings indicated that (i) parents were satisfied with the opportunities provided for their children to receive free special education and (ii) there was discontent about the use of government-funded resources, the quality of teaching, environmental arrangements, attitudes and beliefs toward SWD, inspection and supervision, and the way policy was designed and implemented. Findings demonstrate the need to reconsider the quality of education offered in private special education centers and the ways to improve the quality level.

Keywords

special education, disability, privatization, student voice, parent voice, Turkey

Introduction

The issue of where and how students with disabilities (SWD) should be educated has been debated for long. Internationally, mainstream schools and separate schools are the primary means of educating SWD. In most countries, the law requires that SWD be served in the least restrictive institutions, meaning that all children have the right to mainstream education without their needs being ignored (Carran & Kellner, 2009; Gaad & Khan, 2007; Sakiz, 2016a). Therefore, the number of SWD educated in mainstream schools has been on a rapid rise (Sharma et al., 2017). Students educated in mainstream schools may receive additional special educational support to help them benefit from the mainstream environment and curricula.

Around the world, both public and private schools offer special education to SWD. The education given to SWD in private schools may take several forms such as “private education with tuition paid by beneficiaries” or “private education subsidized by government funding.” Both systems are prevalent. However, transferring government funding to private schools has often been under heavy criticism (Pasachoff, 2011). The criticisms mostly involve whether the intention to make a profit precedes the effort to design and offer quality education.

When designed properly, special education can offer a unique provision to SWD and contribute to their development (Kauffman, 2015). “Special education involves delivering and monitoring a specially designed and coordinated set of comprehensive, research-based instructional and assessment practices and related services to students with learning, behavioral, emotional, physical, health or sensory disabilities” (Salend, 2011, p. 7). The purposes of these instructional services involve identifying and addressing students’ strengths and challenges; supporting their educational, social, behavioral, and physical development; and fostering equity and access to all aspects of schooling, the community, and society (Salend, 2011).

There have been various conceptualizations of effective special education service delivery systems. These frameworks have guided various special education research and

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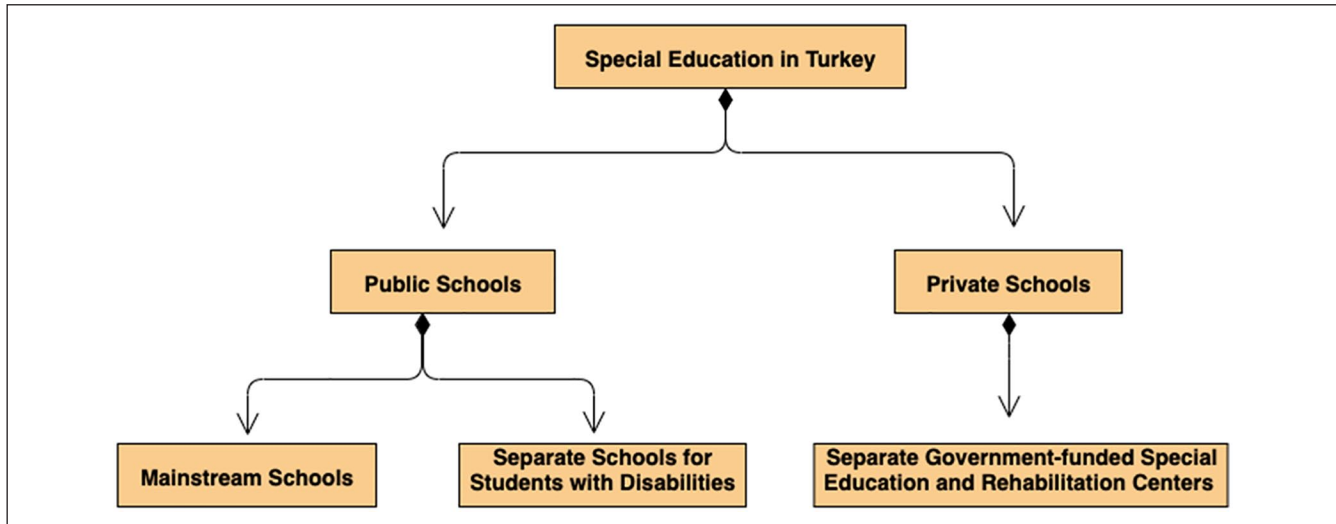


Figure 1. Map showing provision of special education services in Turkey.

service delivery systems adopted and implemented in different contexts. For example, Skårbrevik (2005) proposed a framework to look for quality in a special education program. He conceptualizes adequacy and equity of the programs (e.g., the benefit of students from the program, relevance between disability, educational needs, teaching methods, etc.) and social inclusion (e.g., active student participation, peer communication, socialization, etc.) as indicators of quality. Similarly, Booth and Ainscow (2002) proposed to improve three dimensions of the school system from an inclusive perspective: (1) policy, (2) culture, and (3) practice. The policy dimension is concerned with the running of the school; practices are about what is learned and taught and how it is learned and taught in the school, and the culture reflects relationships and deeply held values and beliefs embedded in the school. In this study, the conceptualization of Booth and Ainscow (2002) has guided the methodology and provided an analytical framework for the data.

Special Education and Its Privatization in Turkey

In Turkey, special education is controlled by the Special Education Guiding and Consulting Services Head Office under the Ministry of Education. The number of SWD in educational institutions is 398,815 (Ministry of Education, 2019). Among these students, 295,697 are in mainstream schools while the others are in separate schools for SWD. The SWD in mainstream schools can also receive services in separate private schools, which are called Special Education and Rehabilitation Centers (SERCs) and run by private initiative. The structure of the provision of special education services in Turkey is depicted in Figure 1.

In Turkey, separate schools for SWD take two forms. First, separate public schools for SWD are run by the state and provide free education. Second, SERCs offer free special

education to SWD, but they receive government funding to provide these services. Government funding is provided monthly in the form of tuition fees of SWD who receive special education in SERCs. SERC services supplement the education provided by public schools for SWD; therefore, all SWD can receive services from SERCs and public schools at the same time. One reason for this is that education in Turkey is compulsory from primary to upper secondary education (Grades 1–12), and the special education offered in SERCs is not considered part of compulsory education.

SERCs were opened, established, and managed under Law 5580. SERCs can offer services appropriate to a single type of disability as well as more than one type of disability. SWD in SERCs are entitled to a maximum of 8 hr of individual instruction and 4 hr of group instruction per month. The instruction offered in SERCs is planned based on a standardized curriculum, which can be accommodated to the needs of each student through an individual educational plan (IEP). The staff in SERCs includes school managers, teachers, and psychologists/counselors.

The Ministry of Education statistics show that the number of SERCs has been increasing. The number of SWD was 298,794 in 1,795 SERCs at the end of the 2013 (Ministry of Education, 2014), while the number of SWD increased to 415,785 in 2,505 SERCs at the end of 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2019). Sargin and Hamurcu (2010) asserted that the reason for the increasing number of SERCs is insufficient special education offered in public schools.

Significance of Research

The case of private schools that offer special education to SWD as well as the funding they receive from the government in return is a rather unknown and underresearched topic. An already limited number of studies offer arguments

that focus on only one aspect of the special education service delivery system, often ignoring the perspective of the service beneficiaries such as SWD and their families. Also, some studies advocate private intervention claiming that government agencies are naturally inefficient in offering quality education, whereas some argue that excessive focus on private initiative may result in loss of control over law implementation and lead to arbitrary practice in private institutions (Pasachoff, 2011). In a study by Taylor (2005) who investigated the current state of special education services in private schools in the United States, significant gaps were found between what was promised and what happened. Leadership styles were a significant factor in providing effective special education. Though dated, outcomes of the study by Abbott and Frank (1975) indicate satisfaction among parents of SWD attending a private special education school in the United States. Children were perceived as achieving academically and behaviorally.

In Turkey, the available research on SERCs has investigated special education from the perspective of staff and managers. For example, Melekoğlu (2013) investigated the attitudes toward SWD in SERCs and located the need for staff training programs to enhance positive attitudes toward SWD. Also, Gürgür et al. (2016) found that staff working in SERCs need to be supported in terms of qualification, preparedness, and self-efficacy. Sargin and Hamurcu (2010) investigated the problems faced by counselors working in SERCs and found that some of the counselors experience role confusion and problems with institutional management. Also, Altinkurt (2008) reported a low satisfaction level among managers of SERCs due to problems experienced in staff quality, curriculum, materials, physical space, and financial issues. Teachers joining a study conducted by Gürgür et al. (2016) stated that a maximum of 12 hr of instruction per month is not sufficient to meet the educational needs of SWD. Besides, Yıkılmış and Özbey (2009) criticized that the curriculum taught in SERCs lacked cultural and artistic content.

As seen, there is limited research on SERCs in Turkey. However, to our knowledge, there is no study, which critically investigates the SERCs from the perspective of SWD and their parents, who are the main service receivers in special education. To achieve this aim, the following research questions are asked:

Research Question 1: What are the opinions of SWD and their parents regarding the special education offered in special education and rehabilitation centers (government-funded private special education institutions) in Turkey?

Research Question 2: What recommendations do SWD and their parents make for improving the quality of the cultures, practices, and policies of special education and rehabilitation centers?

Method

Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design and collected both quantitative and qualitative data from SWD and their parents. A survey and an interview schedule were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. Within mixed-methods research, this research followed the procedures of a Triangulation Design (Cresswell, 2009). The purpose of this design is “to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic” (Morse, 1991, p. 122) to best understand the research problem. This design is used when a researcher wants to directly compare and contrast quantitative statistical results with qualitative findings or to validate or expand quantitative results with qualitative data. Both data collection and analyses occur within the same time-frame. Finally, the researcher attempts to merge the two data sets, typically by bringing the separate results together in the interpretation or by transforming data to facilitate the integration of the two data types during the analysis.

Participants and Sampling

SWD and their parents participated in this study. A survey was administered to 453 SWD and 479 parents, followed by interviews with 38 parents. Student age ranged from 8 to 18 and the mean age was 13.8. The age of parents of SWD ranged from 29 to 61 and the mean age was 40. The inclusion criteria for students involved (a) medical diagnosis with a disability, (b) ability to access the survey with accommodations, and (c) enrollment in a SERC. All parents whose children fit the inclusion criteria could join the study. Characteristics of SWD and their parents are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Participants in this study came from four geographical regions (Marmara, Aegean, Eastern Anatolia, and Southeast Anatolia) and six cities in Turkey. In the process of selecting SERCs and participants, first, managers of 26 SERCs located in six cities were contacted via email and asked whether they volunteered to join the research. The SERCs which were invited to participate were those that the authors had a connection with, usually in terms of cooperation in academic projects. Managers of six SERCs (23.1%) which were located in six different cities and four different regions agreed to participate in the study. Next, each member of the research team visited the SERCs in person and organized data collection with managers of SERCs. The cities where the SERCs were located were selected because they were accessible to the research team in that either the researchers lived there or the cities were very close to where they lived. After collecting their contact information, parents of SWD were approached by telephone and provided with the initial briefing about the research. In total, 1217 parents were invited to fill a survey and, subsequently, 177 parents to join

Table 1. Characteristics of Participant Students in Survey.

Characteristics	n/%	Education status (n/%)	
		Attending only SERCs(Private)	Attending both public (mainstream or separate)and private schools (SERCs)
Gender			
Male	254/56.1	39	215
Female	199/43.9	24	175
Type of disability			
Learning disability (LD)	148/32.7	20	128
Orthopedic disability	106/23.4	7	99
Visual disability	87/19.2	10	77
Speech and language disability	74/16.3	15	59
Intellectual disability	38/8.4	11	27
Total	453/100	63	390

Notes. Students who attended only SERCs, either were out of compulsory education age range or dropped out of school due to health conditions or underachievement. SERCs = special education and rehabilitation centers.

Table 2. Characteristics of Participant Parents in Survey and Interview.

Characteristics	Survey	Interview
	n/%	n/%
Gender		
Male	157/32.8	11/28.9
Female	322/67.2	27/71.1
Children's type of disability		
Learning disability (LD)	151/31.5	15/39.5
Orthopedic disability	113/23.6	7/18.4
Visual disability	93/19.4	6/15.7
Speech and language disability	83/17.3	5/13.2
Intellectual disability	39/8.2	5/13.2
Total	479/100	38/100

an interview. Five hundred forty-nine parents agreed to take a questionnaire (45.1%) and consented to their children's participation in the research while 44 of them accepted the interview offer (24.9%). The parents who were invited for an interview were sampled for maximum variation, intentionally to recruit a certain number of interview participants from across all disability categories. At least one parent, and in some cases both parents of each SWD, filled the survey while parents of SWD from each disability category joined the interviews. Third, 549 SWD were approached and 483 of them volunteered to take a survey (88.0%). Before survey administration, verbal assent from SWD and written consent for their participation from their parents were obtained.

Data Collection Tools

To collect data in this study, three tools were used. First, a demographic information form was prepared for students and their parents. The forms included demographic information

such as gender, type of disability, and educational level. Second, the authors created The Satisfaction with Special Education Scale involving a parent (31 items) and student version (21 items) (Online Appendices A and B). The construction of the survey items and dimensions was guided by the framework of Booth and Ainscow (2002). The seven dimensions of quality are extracted from the three global aspects of the framework: culture, practice, and policy. The culture aspect involves Dimension 1: "A welcoming environment" and Dimension 2: "Respecting diversity." The practice aspect involves Dimension 3: "Planning special education and support services," Dimension 4: "Communication and collaboration," Dimension 5: "Learning and development" and Dimension 6: "Teaching." Finally, the policy aspect involves Dimension 7: "Policy." At the end of the student scale, SWD were provided with a space where they could respond to the following open-ended questions: "What could be done for you to have better special education in the SERCs?" and "What would make you happier in the SERC?."

The Satisfaction with Special Education Scale utilizes a Likert-type scale and is scored from 1 to 3 (1: I disagree; 2: I neither agree nor disagree; 3: I agree), with "1" indicating a low score, "2" indicating a mediocre score and "3" indicating a high score of satisfaction with the special education provided in SERCs. Upon constructing the draft scale, feedback from three experts was obtained. Two academics working in departments of education analyzed the survey thematically while one expert analyzed the language. In this study, the internal reliability of the parent and student scales were $\alpha = .81$ and $\alpha = .78$, respectively.

Third, a semi-structured interview form with open-ended questions was designed to allow participants to make recommendations for better SERCs (e.g., "What could be done for a better special education in the SERCs?," "What would make students happier in the SERC?") and to expand on their thought on the policy, culture, and practices of the SERCs

their children attend (e.g., “What kind of an impact has the education received in the SERC made on the social skills of your child?” “How do you evaluate the level of communication and cooperation between you and the SERC?”). Questions in the interviews focused on the culture, practices, and policy of the SERCs and the seven dimensions addressed in the survey. Questions were sometimes adapted based on factors such as type of disability (e.g., “Are there adequate technologies such as audiobooks for your child?”).

Data Collection

This research was approved by the institutional review board where the corresponding author was based (IRB No: 2018-11). First, The Satisfaction with Special Education Scale was administered to SWD and their parents in the first cycle, followed by interviews with the parents. Five hundred forty-nine parents volunteered to join the study and agreed that the next time they and their children visit the SERCs they would fill in the surveys. During visits, parents and children were informed about and provided with the survey. Four hundred thirty-nine parents and 411 children filled the scales in SERCs in separate rooms while 40 parents and 42 children wanted to fill the survey at home. After a week, 479 parents and 453 children returned the survey in a filled form. During administration, SWD were accompanied by people from the research team who assisted them when they needed it. Seventy-two students with visual difficulty were provided with online versions of the surveys while 15 of them preferred Braille printed versions. Students with speech and language difficulty and students with orthopedic difficulty did not need any assistance while taking the surveys. Students with a learning disability and intellectual disability were accompanied by reading and marking assistants who assisted throughout filling the survey. The time required for filling the survey ranged from 8 to 22 min.

Finally, 44 parents who had previously agreed to join the interview during the survey administration were contacted through telephone and 38 of them confirmed previous agreement to join the interviews (86.4%). Parents were asked about the type of interview they preferred. Twenty-six interviews were carried out face to face in schools, whereas 12 interviews were carried out on the telephone. In schools, members of the research team used separate rooms to carry out the interviews. Interviews lasted between 20 and 47 min. All participants agreed to record the interviews. The entire data collection lasted approximately four months.

Data Analysis

In this study, we conducted analyses of qualitative and quantitative data concurrently within a triangulation design. This strategy proposes that each type of data can be collected and analyzed separately and independently, using the techniques traditionally associated with each data type (Creswell, 2009).

In this model, the researcher collects and analyzes quantitative and qualitative data separately on the same phenomenon and then the different results are converged (by comparing and contrasting the different results) during the interpretation. The quantitative data collected from surveys were analyzed descriptively to describe data with means and frequencies. Data were entered and analyzed via SPSS Version 22. Accuracy was ensured by having two people entering and checking the data. The survey and interviews were in Turkish initially and then translated into English for the manuscript. The accuracy and reliability of the translation were checked and approved by two other members of the research team and an academic with a doctoral degree in the English language.

The qualitative data were analyzed thematically. This process involved a deductive a priori template of codes approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This approach helped complement the research questions by allowing the process of deductive thematic analysis to include the dimensions of The Satisfaction with Special Education Scale. After careful reading of data, transcripts were selectively coded in relation to the research question and the prevalence of each pattern. Transcriptions were conducted by members of the research team. Connections among codes were established and seven broader themes were identified to locate significance within the data set. A summary of the transcripts as well as the themes was sent to the participants to confirm that they agree to the summaries. Also, conclusions were verified by returning to the original transcripts and through ongoing discussions and reflection within the research team that involved two other colleagues. Finally, all data were triangulated and consequently, qualitative and quantitative results mutually confirmed and supported the same conclusions (Creswell, 2009).

Findings

Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations for the student and parent versions of The Satisfaction with Special Education Scale are presented in Table 3. Qualitative findings matched the seven a priori dimensions that constituted The Satisfaction with Special Education Scale except for an eighth theme which involved students' recommendations for a better SERC. When parent quotes are provided in the findings, a “P” is used rather than a name to ensure anonymity and to demonstrate that a variety of perspectives are presented. While reporting qualitative data, some words were used as a sign of quantification. However, in such cases, numbers were also used to make findings more transparent and add more meaning to the research (Maxwell, 2010).

The overall satisfaction level with the special education offered in SERCs was $M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.46$ for parents and $M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.61$ for students. The dimension with the highest satisfaction level was “a welcoming environment”

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Student and Parent Versions of The Satisfaction With Special Education Scale.

Variables		N	M (1–3 scale)	SD
Satisfaction Scale (total)	Students	453	2.01	0.61
	Parents	479	1.86	0.46
A welcoming environment	Students	453	2.12	0.75
	Parents	479	2.01	0.78
Respecting diversity	Students	453	1.98	0.45
	Parents	479	1.86	0.57
Planning special education and support services	Students	453	1.78	0.63
	Parents	479	1.68	0.65
Communication and collaboration	Students	453	2.05	0.43
	Parents	479	1.91	0.39
Learning and development	Students	453	2.02	0.65
	Parents	479	1.77	0.59
Teaching	Students	453	1.85	0.46
	Parents	479	1.89	0.37
Policy	Students	453	2.33	0.75
	Parents	479	1.98	0.52

for parents ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.78$) and “policy” for students ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.75$). The dimension with the lowest satisfaction level was “planning special education and support services” for both parents ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.65$) and students ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.63$).

A Welcoming Environment

Some questions in the survey and interview schedule aimed to investigate whether the SERCs contained an established and supportive structure where students and their parents felt welcomed and belonging. Survey findings showed that the levels of satisfaction with the atmosphere of the schools were $M = 2.12$, $SD = 0.75$ for students and $M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.78$ for parents.

Interview findings showed that some parents ($n = 12$) were happy with how they were welcomed in the SERCs and said, “We feel welcome in this school. They provide a free school bus and take care of our children. In the past, we had nothing; all children were locked at home” (P3). However, 17 parents were critical. One parent said, “We were welcomed initially but this rarely went on after registration because registration means money is guaranteed” (P21) while another claimed, “The entrance is shiny and clean. There is a good impression. However, I have not seen rehabilitation [meaning SERC] with a garden or big enough spaces, classrooms” (P11). Indeed, 34 parents recommended the SERCs to change their focus from “commerce” to “education.” For example, a parent of a student with a more severe disability said, “If admission means registration, this is fine. We were registered but were never satisfied. I never felt my child was truly admitted to the school.” (P26). Also, 24 recommended that SERCs possess better infrastructure and more opportunities (e.g., pool, playground). Similarly,

41 SWD asked for bigger playgrounds while complaining about the “apartment-like structures” of the SERCs. Overall, findings indicated dissatisfaction among participants as to whether SERCs officially and unconditionally admitted students to the school, had welcoming attitudes and possessed a satisfactory physical infrastructure involving appropriate materials, accessible and multiple spaces and places to socialize, learn, and play.

Respecting Diversity

Parents and students were asked whether attitudes and practices in SERCs favored diversity of students’ and parents’ background (e.g., ability level, socioeconomic status), and associated values such as participation and learning. The satisfaction level with the level of diversity that was appreciated and celebrated in the SERCs was $M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.57$ for parents and $M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.45$ for students. Interviews revealed that parents were not convinced with the arguments that students were valued, not discriminated against, and motivated to participate and learn. Twenty-four parents exemplified this case. A parent said, “Many times, the reading teacher told me that my child’s capacity was limited and he could never do more. They say he will not be a doctor or a lawyer, so why to force it?” (P6). Similarly, 29 parents recommended that awareness regarding disability should be enhanced among professionals and other individuals in society. For example, a parent said, “People should believe these children can learn and achieve. Nobody is aware of this fact.” (P31).

The statements presented above indicate a lack of commitment to learning, a commercial way of thinking about education, and the existence of the belief that the intellectual capacity of a human being is fixed. However, six parents

reported satisfaction with the attitudes in SERCs. For example, one parent said, “We have had very good teachers. In these schools, teachers strive more than the institution. However, there is a high turnover here” (P20).

Communication and Collaboration

Students and their parents expressed their views regarding the nature and quality of the communication and collaboration among stakeholders within the SERCs. Survey findings showed that the level of satisfaction with the nature and quality of communication and collaboration was $M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.43$ for students and $M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.39$ for parents. From the interviews, 20 parents thought that communication and collaboration within SERCs were not effective. A parent said, “Most of the education is individual. Only four hours a week are given for group education. Students see only their teachers” (P12) while another parent claimed, “We are called only when there is a problem. Teachers in the SERC and those in the school [meaning the mainstream school where the student receives public education] do not know each other” (P30). Indeed, 26 parents recommended that cooperation among professionals and other institutions should be enhanced.

The statements presented above reflect that the curriculum in SERCs allows little group work and that there is a lack of communication between stakeholders. However, some parents ($n = 5$) were satisfied with the level of communication within SERCs. For example, a parent said, “The teacher sometimes calls me when we cannot go there and asks why we did not go. They are concerned” (P22).

Planning Special Education and Support Services

Participants were asked whether special education and support services were planned well and students were satisfied with the organization, delivery, and quality of these services. Survey findings indicated that the level of satisfaction with the special education and support services provided in the SERCs was $M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.65$ for parents and $M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.63$ for students. During interviews, 26 parents reported negative views of planning and quality of the services. A parent stated, “I bring my child only for socialization so she does not stay alone at home. I have no expectations from the SERC. It has been years but there is little development in reading, daily tasks or things like that” (P16) while another one said, “It seems to me like things are done superficially in classrooms. Students always do random stuff, like painting. I do not think staff plans anything” (P23). Despite major dissatisfaction, there were parents ($n = 5$) who reported positive views regarding the special education and support services in SERCs. A parent said, “We cannot expect more, it [meaning special education] is free and we have free transportation” (P33).

SWD and their parents made recommendations for better special education and support services in SERCs. Students

asked for more time to play with friends ($n = 56$); sports, social, cultural, and art activities (e.g., theater, games, music) to be integrated with the program ($n = 44$); and more group activities ($n = 43$). They also recommended the employment of some expert groups such as audiologists. As for parents, they recommended a denser content including more hours of special education ($n = 28$) and psychological support for students and families ($n = 26$).

Learning and Development

Students and parents commented on the level of student learning and development in the SERCs. Survey findings showed that the satisfaction level among students was $M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.65$, whereas this level was $M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.58$ among parents. Twenty-three parents reported dissatisfaction. For example, a parent said, “There has not been any change in the academic or life skills based on the education received in the SERC. My child is still at the same level she started” (P15) while another parent stated, “At least I was expecting that he [meaning the student] could gain self-care skills. There has not been any progress. He cannot meet his toilet needs alone. Maybe it could happen with a better teacher” (P22). For their better learning and development, SWD recommended that the classes include their interests and needs ($n = 51$) while their parents are integrated into the learning processes in the schools ($n = 36$).

In addition to dissatisfaction, 10 parents were happy with the development of their students in some areas. A parent exemplified this case and said, “I see that physiotherapy is working for my child. Previously, she could not stand up. Now she can stand without support” (P1).

Teaching

Parents and students provided opinions about the way teaching was practiced in SERCs. Survey findings indicated that the level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching among parents was $M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.37$ and $M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.46$ for students. Three of the 19 parents who reported dissatisfaction stated, respectively, “I often see the students doing things on their own in the class when they are in groups. Teachers just think they cannot do anything for them so they leave them alone” (P14); “Most things happen spontaneously in the school. In normal schools [meaning mainstream public schools] there are books and homework and other things” (P34); and “Teachers could be better. They come here because they are not good to work in public schools. Some even do not teach at all, they sign the attendance and show as if they teach well” (P16). Although the majority of the parents were unsatisfied, seven reported positive views regarding the teaching in the SERC. A parent said, “Our teacher liked his job and this was reflected in the development of my child. This is essential for a teacher to support a child” (P29).

SWD and their parents made recommendations regarding the quality of teaching in the SERCs. Students recommended less homework ($n = 49$) and less aggressive teachers ($n = 14$) in the classes. Parents also highlighted the need for more competent teachers ($n = 58$) who can manage their stress well ($n = 32$).

Policy

Policy regarding SERCs was investigated from the perspective of parents and students. Survey findings showed that the satisfaction level with policy was $M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.75$ for students and $M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.52$ for parents. During interviews, eight parents reported positive views while 26 of them were negative. A satisfied parent said, "The policy gave a chance to our children to go out and receive an education like their peers" (P27). However, two parents who were less satisfied said, "What the school aims and what they do are not shared with us. Owners of SERCs are mostly not educators. I did not know until you said that there were policy and regulations for the SERCs" (P13) and "People change a lot in SERCs. We changed three schools but no difference. Each decision-maker changes the system when they come to power" (P8). While commenting on the current policy, parents also made recommendations to improve policy mainly by establishing stronger systems of accountability and inspection ($n = 34$) by and including the views of parents and students in making policy ($n = 19$).

Discussion

This study investigated the level of satisfaction among SWD and their parents with the organization, delivery, and quality of the special education offered in SERCs. We argue that the components investigated in this study (e.g., attitudes, teaching, learning, and development) are interrelated, and a systemic look is required to evaluate the role of each element in considering the education offered in SERCs. Overall, the findings can be clustered around three dimensions of the school system: culture, practice, and policy.

Culture

The cultural dimension of a school system reflects relationships and deeply held values and beliefs embedded in the school. A sustainable, positive school atmosphere enables students to learn while it helps to maintain a productive, fruitful, and satisfying life in a democratic society (Cohen et al., 2009). When it comes to special education, effectiveness depends on a culture where all students feel belonging and share common values (DiPaola et al., 2004). Additional support in terms of resources and classroom organization is crucial in special education (Farrell, 2009). However, in this study, findings were far from reflecting a universal satisfaction among students and parents with the atmosphere of the

SERCs, including physical structures and cultures where diversity is respected and SWD are not discriminated against. It is expected that the institutions where SWD are educated play an important part in combating negative attitudes toward disability. However, participant views in this study implied that favorable attitudes toward diversity, equity, participation, and learning need to be part of the entire mechanisms of the school system. Such beliefs and practices mostly remained individual and were far from reflecting an institutional approach.

The benefits of special education received by SWD increase when school practices are based on values, norms, and rules that address diversity and high expectations (Dyson et al., 2002). This mission can be achieved in an atmosphere where school staff share the idea of difference and acceptance and commit to offering educational opportunities to all students (Kugelmass, 2001). Overall, these can be possible under successful school management and effective leadership styles that can go beyond what is promised and provide effective special education (Taylor, 2005). These are in line with the current needs of SERCs of Turkey.

In many parts of the world, special education was the first means of offering education to SWD (Sakiz & Woods, 2014). In Turkey, similarly, many individuals with disabilities have been saved by SERCs from being uneducated or remaining detached from social life (Vural & Yücesoy, 2003). In the study, some students and parents were happy to be at SERCs because they could not attend special education in the past mostly due to the unavailability of special education services. This finding is in line with Abbott and Frank (1975) who reported that receiving education in a special education school improved the social, academic, and behavioral performance of SWD. Among SWD, the impact of registering in education provides a sense of socialization with the rest of society and motivation to achieve at school.

Practice

The practical aspect of a school system is about what is learned and taught and how it is learned and taught in the school. Findings in this study indicated that the nature and channels of communication among stakeholders rarely allowed cooperation and collaboration to guide effective school practices. For example, parents wanted to be included in the education of their children and complained about the lack of communication between teachers in public schools and those in SERCs. However, effective communication and collaboration are foundational elements in providing high-quality services for SWD (Cook & Friend, 2010; Wallace et al., 2002). Collaboration among stakeholders leads to positive outcomes such as enhanced levels of student achievement (Dufour et al., 2006), student literacy (Irwin & Farr, 2004), and well-being (Seligman et al., 2005). Effective communication between families and schools can lead to better educational outcomes for SWD (McNaughton &

Vostal, 2010). Parents can be allies to schools because they can facilitate the process of special education by working with their children (Whitbread et al., 2007).

In a school context, the atmosphere which involves communication and collaboration is related to the way services are planned and provided. Research shows that SWD benefit from carefully planned and implemented school practices (Tremblay, 2013). These benefits include improvements in academic achievement (Sakız, 2016b; Uditsky & Hughson, 2012), transition to and achievement in higher education (Moriña, 2017), employment opportunities after graduation (Hughson et al., 2006), social skills, self-esteem, peer acceptance, and sustainable relationships (Fırat, 2020; O'Brien et al., 2009; Sakız, 2017).

In this study, some students and parents were satisfied with the individual efforts of some teachers. However, some others complained about the lack of an institutional strategy to provide effective special education and the low level of proficiency and preparedness among staff working in SERCs. Indeed, recommendations made by SWD and their parents included more competent staff who can establish stronger social and emotional bonds with students. First, curricular goals within institutions providing special education are important for preventing arbitrary practice. These goals can determine individual instructional goals for each SWD and refer to broader contexts where these goals can be addressed (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). While curricular practices may involve modifications and adaptations to orient the content to the needs of individual students, they should be in line with principles that highlight social-emotional learning, cooperation, peer support, and participation. An effective curriculum increases the opportunities for learning, student development, and the options for teachers to improve their capacity. Pisha and Stahl (2005) claimed that not many teachers are proficient in utilizing their capacity to adapt the curriculum materials to meet the needs of SWD. Therefore, an inappropriate teaching approach may create or exacerbate learning difficulties for some students (Westwood, 2007). For example, general education teachers in Turkey can work as special education teachers if they take a 160-hr course on special education. This course, however, does not include practice before attending the field (Altinkurt, 2008). Within the Turkish context, ways to increase the knowledge and readiness among staff and allow them to practice their knowledge before working with SWD in SERCs should be urgently found (Altinkurt, 2008; Gürgür et al., 2016).

Provision of services and expectations from students is related to the level of student learning and development in a school. Data in this study indicated a gap between the services provided in SERCs and what should be expected from these institutions. When asked about the role of SERCs in the learning and development of SWD, statements included dissatisfaction among students and parents. Their statements revealed that learning and development were mostly ensured by the effort of individual teachers despite only a few signs

of an institutional policy to provide students with quality education. An individual effort by some teachers might create a difference. However, barriers to effective special education may not be overcome unless these efforts are supported by a shared strategy to plan and implement curricular activities and invest in professional development.

The learning gap was also reflected in the recommendations made by SWD and their parents. Recommendations of parents pointed to the need for improvements in the curricular content and application while students preferred more student-centered content. Enhancing learning and development among SWD requires the establishment of a student-centered atmosphere which involves beliefs that the ability of SWD is not fixed and they can achieve high expectations. Also, learning is related to a professionally designed curriculum, sufficient resources, well-prepared staff, and a common mission to realize local and national policy.

Policy

The policy dimension is concerned with the running of the school and making the necessary legislation that facilitates effective school practices. In Turkey, policy development in the past 15 years regarding special education has been observable, impacting the lives of individuals with disabilities. Despite satisfaction, the way policy is implemented has been often criticized. In this study, participant views reflected that special education policy needed transparency and improvement to guide successful educational practice. Especially, parental recommendations involved the need for political support to improve the conditions of SERCs. Considering the lack of understanding and awareness about the policy on SERCs in Turkey, there is a need to develop long-term sustainable policies by employing a collaborative and multisectoral approach. Such policy needs to underline the “clientelist” attitude toward SWD, the issue of commercialization of SERCs, the detached communication between SERCs and schools, the effectiveness of the educational practices in SERCs, and public support for the participation of SWD in education and larger social life.

Parents in the study stated that they were welcomed to the SERC but this interest was lost after they were registered because registration guaranteed income to the institution. This is a strictly criticized issue in Turkey. Indeed, Pasachoff (2011) stated that excessive focus on private education may result in arbitrary practice because privatization is often associated with the priority and focus on capital rather than quality. Similar studies in Turkey indicated that some founders of SERCs do not possess an education background because the aim to open a SERC is to make a profit (Gürgür et al., 2016). Also, the current policy requires that SERCs are funded monthly while the payment is done regardless of the investigation of the quality of education offered in SERCs. However, according to Altinkurt (2008), all staff in any institution serving SWD should possess a

relevant educational orientation. Besides, there is a need for monitoring and inspection systems that establish a balance between what SERCs offer and what they receive in return.

Limitations

This study echoes student and parent voice, a case rarely practiced in disability research in Turkey. However, there are some limitations. First, although the study involves the participation of hundreds of students and parents, the outcomes of this study are generalizable only to the participants. Because this study relied on a convenience sample, those who volunteered and then followed through with their participation may have experiences with the SERC that are different from those who could not or chose not to participate. In addition, the parents and students at these SERCs with existing relationships with the researchers may have different experiences than those at other SERCs. Second, conclusions regarding SERCs are made based on the views of students and parents. Future research can cover a wider participant group including school staff and collect observational, textual, or numerical data from SERCs to enhance the reliability of the findings. Third, during survey administration, students with intellectual and learning disabilities were accompanied by reading and marking assistants in case they needed support. Although assistants paid attention to remain as objective as possible, this might have some implications on how they responded to the survey. Therefore, future studies may explore and utilize methods that allow students to provide data independently.

Implications

This study has several implications for policy and practice. First, the concerns regarding the effectiveness of the education provided in SERCs and the way government funding is used should be investigated by the Ministry of Education and addressed by the new policy. This policy may set new standards for SERCs to get government funding such as achievement of certain levels of learning outcomes, a certain level of expertise among school staff, and/or necessary infrastructures such as adequate and relevant equipment, appropriate physical space, and supportive human resources. Second, SERCs may develop an understanding that quality in education should precede profit. Also, it is students and parents who are the recipients of the services so their level of satisfaction ultimately matters the most. Therefore, SERCs may include parent and student feedback in trying to improve the quality of service. For example, SERCs may plan, design, and implement instruction by taking into account the views, needs, and priorities of students and their parents. Besides, SERCs may focus on establishing a welcoming physical and psychological atmosphere, improving teaching quality, maintaining long-term collaboration among participants, providing pre-service and in-service improvement facilities

for school staff, and monitoring student learning and development.

Conclusions

To conclude, the recent political and practical attempts to widen the range of education offered to SWD promise better educational outcomes for SWD in Turkey. However, results regarding the effectiveness of the education offered have been uneven up to now. Also, systems such as SERCs, public mainstream and separate co-exist with little consideration of each other's existence. Attempts to design a holistic policy that considers the dynamics of each system are needed.

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Supplemental Material

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